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A Harry Potter Holocaust

The *Harry Potter* series has become an incredible phenomenon, approaching on the level of obsession, for readers of all ages. While the series serves as a great source of entertainment and an escape into the realm of magic and whimsy, below the surface it contains serious cultural and political undertones. One theme is that of racial persecution and near-genocide. After digging deeper and searching for underlying significance, one can find a startling resemblance between the events that unfold in the *Harry Potter* series and the real-world events of World War II and the Holocaust. Although the series cannot be considered an exact allegory to the Holocaust, there are certainly many characteristics of the books that seem to be too similar to simply be coincidental. Could Rowling have been sending her audience a message through the disguise of fiction and fantasy? This seems likely, as;

At its best, by taking advantage of our suspension of disbelief, fiction can penetrate our psychological defenses and reach our core beliefs. J. K. Rowling understands this. She uses the Harry Potter series not only to entertain, but to provide readers with a real world moral framework that explicitly encompasses race-related issues (Lyubansky 233).

It would be an exaggeration to hypothesize that Rowling’s purpose for writing the series was to send an intense cultural message to the world. *Harry Potter* is, more than anything, a source of entertainment for all ages. However, there are many striking similarities between real-world characters and events that should not be overlooked when analyzing the text.

First, it is important to note the similarities between many of Rowling’s fictional characters and several of the real-life personalities of World War II. It is almost too easy to compare Lord Voldemort with Adolf Hitler. Both Hitler and Voldemort are “half-bloods,” or rather, Hitler was half German and half Jewish while Voldemort is half wizard and half Muggle. The irony of both figures is apparent, as “Like Hitler, Rowling’s Voldemort loathes his own heritage and attempts to compensate for his undesirable background by crusading against it,” (Noren 101). Rowling herself even acknowledges this similarity, as;

In a July 2000 interview with the CBC, Rowling said, “In the second book, *Chamber of Secrets*, in fact he [Voldemort] is exactly what I’ve said before. He takes what he perceives to be a defect in himself, in other words the non-purity of his blood, and he projects it onto others. It’s like Hitler and the Aryan ideal, to which he [Hitler] did not conform at all, himself. And so Voldemort is doing this also. He takes his own inferiority, and turns it back on other people and attempts to exterminate in them what he hates in himself (Peterson 240).

Furthermore, both individuals greatly played up and boasted about the half of their ancestry of which they were most proud. The men felt that their lineage was superior to all other possible lineages. Voldemort is related to the Gaunts, who stem from a direct line of Salazar Slytherin; he himself hated non-magical people. Similarly, Hitler preached his master, or Aryan, race and felt that it was above all other races. Also, both figures had a group of devoted followers to execute their plans and enforce their will. For Voldemort, these are his Death Eaters, and for Hitler it was the S.S. Another interesting similarity is that both men are associated with a symbol. Voldmort has the Death Eater sign consisting of a skull with a serpent emerging from its mouth while Hitler’s regime was symbolized by the swastika. Aside from these obvious similarities, it is important to note that both Voldemort and Hitler could be considered to have narcissistic personalities, and both individuals contained a warped sense of logic that ultimately led to an immense amount of death and tragedy. Clearly, the similarities between these figures included;

Megalomaniacal tendencies and a fixed determination to repress [feelings of weakness, timidity], and to condemn them in others. Hitler, too, insisted on always being right, with enormous discrimination towards others and an appetite for power. As a tyrannical leader who behaved without conscience and who authorized followers to do the same, Hitler, like Voldemort, could be regarded as having a psychopathic personality (Harry Potter and the Third Reich).

As stated above, the Death Eaters can certainly be compared to the S.S. or the Nazis. Both groups act as the “henchmen” to their respective leaders, doing their bidding and preaching their beliefs. While Hitler and Voldemort possess extreme prejudice toward those whom they deem “unworthy,” their followers adopt such beliefs and assert such ideas quite violently. The harsh hatred of all Muggles and Muggle-borns by the Death Eaters is much like the anti-Semitism displayed by the Nazis during the World War II era. This similarity between fiction and reality is quite shocking; “such attitudes are so abhorrent that it is tempting to dismiss them as fictional evil that could not exist in our world. But they can be viewed as an allegory for the anti-Semitism and racial ideology of Hitler and the Nazis,” (Peterson 240).

Without such loyal and devoted followers, neither Hitler nor Voldemort could have hoped to gain power and implement their ideas. One character in the series that is representative of the Death Eaters is Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy is constantly involved in the evil plots and schemes of Voldemort and is certainly considered to be a villainous character. It is interesting to note that both Lucius and Draco Malfoy, his son, are symbolic of Hitler’s “Aryan race” who were blonde-haired, blue-eyed Germans. Both characters are described as having strikingly pale skin and white-blonde hair. While this could be merely coincidental, it is still noteworthy and coincides with the allegory theory. Furthermore, some of the tendencies and behaviors of the Death Eaters are similar to those displayed by the Nazis before and after Hitler’s demise at the end of World War II. The way in which the Death Eaters treat Muggles and Muggle-borns in the books is quite similar to the violence and hatred displayed by the Nazis toward all Jewish people and those who came to their aid during the war. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, a group of Death Eaters gets together to “play with” and torture several Muggles at the Qudditch World Cup. When Harry asks Mr. Weasley why they did this, his response is;

Harry, that’s their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for him. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn’t resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them (*Harry and the Goblet of Fire,* 90).

Similarly, the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews before and during World War II was anything but humane. Doctors conducted cruel and appalling experiments on a large number of the Jewish captives in the concentration camps, and the S.S. treated the Jewish people with brute force and merciless enforcement of the law. Another parallel between the Death Eaters and the Nazis is that when faced with defeat and possible consequences for their actions, many parties of both groups either denied any affiliation with the crimes they committed or claimed that they were forced into doing so. This likeness can be seen through the;

Corruption and compromise evident in both worlds. These occurrences include, among other events, Hermann Goering’s saying that he “didn’t know anything of these huge crimes,” or defendants in subsequent trials who pleaded that they merely obeyed orders, just like the Death Eaters who pleaded they’d “been acting under the Imperius curse,” (WaggaWaggaWerewolf).

Clearly, it is easy to compare Voldemort with Hitler and, subsequently, the Death Eaters with the Nazis. As previously mentioned, these comparisons allow for the Muggles and Muggle-borns to be similarly compared to the Jews during the World War II era. Both groups were strongly persecuted and forced to either acquiesce to the demands set forth by those in power, or to go into hiding. When Hitler gained power in Germany before the war, he and his party implemented a series of anti-Jewish legislation, forcing those of Jewish lineage to register with the government, and eventually to move into ghettos, and then concentration camps. Likewise;

After taking control in what amounts to a coup, Voldemort’s followers begin implementing laws which closely resemble Nazi laws from the 1930’s which served to both identify the victim group as separate from the larger society, and second, to isolate and segregate it (Chalmers 3).

When Voldemort finally grasps hold of the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, he forces all Muggle-borns to register with the Ministry, and begins making life very difficult for them. He and his accomplices at the Ministry force the Muggle-borns to come to trial and defend their Wizard status, with almost every trial ending in the destruction of the defendant’s wand. Additionally, Voldemort closes off Hogwarts to only those of full-blood status. This is reminiscent of Hitler’s techniques, as “these laws are almost identical to the Nazi equivalents which required that only Aryan students attend educational institutes, that Jews register with the authorities and that used pseudoscience to justify the inferiority of the Jewish race,” (Chalmers 3). Voldemort also employs many of the propaganda tactics put to use by Hitler and his followers to spread anti-Semitic views and beliefs. Both Hitler and Voldemort gained control of the media in order to spin the press in a way that supported their ideas and ambitions. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* Voldemort “takes over” the Daily Prophet and begins to print anti-Muggle and anti-“Mudblood” propaganda. He even states, “we shall cut away the canker that infects us until those of the true blood remain…’ – a statement remarkably similar to Nazi propaganda,” (Chalmers 2). Thus, the harsh treatment and persecution of Muggle-borns by Voldemort and his followers in the *Harry Potter* series is extremely similar to the treatment of the Jews by Hitler and the S.S. during the World War II era.

After considering the glaring similarities such as these, the *Harry Potter* series begins to align well with the idea of a World War II-era allegory. It is also interesting to note not only the similarities between the major Nazi leaders and the primary literary characters, but also between other war participants and secondary literary characters. While the World War II Allies, with important leaders such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, were considered to be the “good guys” of the Holocaust-era, the Order of the Phoenix, led by Albus Dumbledore, are the “good guys” of the *Harry Potter* series. Aside from this, though, it is important to note the behaviors and actions, or lack thereof, of the general public in both the *Harry Potter* series and the real-world events of the Holocaust. It is difficult to divide the world into “good people” and “bad people” when so many bystanders simply stand back and let others battle for control. As Sirius Black puts it, “the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters,” (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 271). In other words, when analyzing the events of the series, it is not sufficient to merely take into account the actions of the Death Eaters versus those of the Order of the Phoenix. Rather, there are many wizards who possess anti-Muggle ideology, but don’t join the ranks of Lord Voldemort, and there are also many wizards who do not possess such strong racial ideas, but simply refuse to come to the aid of the persecuted Muggle-borns. Similarly, during the World War II era, there were a great many bystanders who knew what was going on behind the fences of the concentration camps, but did nothing to come to the rescue of the struggling Jewish population. It is obvious that;

Much of the conflict in *Harry Potter* focuses on the status and rights of wizards based on their magical heritage. Given this premise, the polarized version of the conflict would have one side of the conflict intent on the superiority of Pure-Blood Wizards and the other determined to work towards equality for all. Rowling, however, does not portray such a clear dichotomy between good and evil belief (Chalmers 4).

Thus, Rowling’s story mirrors the dynamics of real-world conflict in that it is impossible to identify people based on “black and white” roles, but rather in realistic occurrences of violence and tragedy, people fit in to many different levels of good and evil and of activism and passivism. Although this may seem like a very general comparison between the *Harry Potter* series and the Holocaust, it is still relevant in that Rowling makes her text much more relatable by including this realistic element.

Evidently, there are a great number of startling connections between the text in the *Harry Potter* series with the events of the Holocaust. Many of the characters and their actions in the books correspond with those of important figures and groups during the World War II-era. While it is somewhat of a stretch to go so far as to argue that every plotline in the *Harry Potter* series is reminiscent of the events of the Holocaust, there are several major parallels that can be drawn between the two situations. Among these parallels are those between characters, behaviors, events, and general concepts. It is remarkable to note that not only is *Harry Potter* a great work of entertainment and fantasy, but it also serves to send important and insightful messages of race-relations and the treatment of certain groups of people. Rowling has publicly acknowledged many of the claims that her series is conspicuously similar to the story of the Holocaust and of World War II. In writing her books she, certainly seems to have asked herself, “what if there were a magical parallel universe where these racial themes could be safely explored under the guise of wizards and Muggles and elves?,” (Lyubansky 233).

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